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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000291

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM PINR PAID KPAO MR

SUBJECT: YOUTH EVENT REVEALS A PASSIONATE BUT ILL-INFORMED MAURITANIAN YOUTH

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

(C) Key Points

-- More than 700 people attended an NDI-sponsored Youth Day which focused on increasing the role of Mauritania's youth in the transition to democracy. The Ambassador opened the event with remarks in classical Arabic.

-- Over 200 youth spoke in what National Democratic Institute (NDI) Political Party Program Director Eric Duhaime described as a "mix of pro and anti-Western views" that were "more moderate" than he had expected.

-- "In what other Arab country will you have a group of university students applauding the US Ambassador," he asked.

-- On March 29 NDI will officially open its office and Political Party Resource Center, which will be available to political parties with computers, internet, a campaign library and printers for flyer and poster production.

-- Duhaime said he believes the U.N. was doing "a poor job with the census," and didn't believe the census or voter lists would meet international standards.

(C) Comments

-- Taya's former ruling party the PRDR (formerly the PRDS) did not attend. While PRDR retains the most developed party structure and has more money than the other parties combined, they continue to lose members and fade in relevance.

-- The U has said that it will leave Mauritania if the voter lists are not found to meet international standards. If this were to happen -- which it could -- it would throw the entire transition process of course.

-- Embassy will continue to push the U to get voter lists that meet international standards.

End Key Points and Comment.

¶1. (U) Local National Democratic Institute (NI) Political Party Program Director Eric Duhaime briefed Ambassador on NDI's highly successful "Youth Day" which the Ambassador opened with remarks in classical Arabic. The ten-hour program held a rally and attended by over 700 students, youth groups, political parties and government Ministers, focused on increasing the role of Mauritania's youth in the transition to democracy.

YOUTH DAY

** CC uuaamm eeccied the mood throughout the day as "lively" adding that "this event was the first time many of these young people had had a real opportunity to publicly express themselves." He went on to describe how "people often rushed the stage" for an opportunity to speak and that "at times we really needed all 30 of our security personnel to maintain order."

¶3. (C) Over 200 youth spoke in what Duhaime described as a "mix of pro and anti-Western views" that were "more moderate" than he had expected. "In what other Arab country will you

have a group of university students applauding the US Ambassador," Duhaime asked, adding that "there were a few radicals, but on the whole, the views were balanced."

¶4. (C) According to Duhaime, the event was the first time student associations were permitted to participate in an official capacity in a government-attended event. Student associations are not recognized by the Mauritanian government, and have been prohibited from official participation in past youth and education events. Duhaime

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said their participation was reluctantly approved by the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research Naji Ould Mohamed Mahmoud only after Duhaime "insisted on the significance of their involvement."

¶5. (C) "The quality of reflection was uneven," Duhaime said, explaining that "while some views were focused and well-articulated, many others were jumbled and nonsensical." He explained how many participants grouped the US with all other Western countries, including on issues such as the recent caricatures of Mohamed which appeared in several non-US newspapers. This example was then expanded on by another speaker as an example of why "US free speech and Democracy don't work in the Arab world." Duhaime proposed that it was likely the youth's "ignorance of the outside world" that led to the confusion and oversimplification, rather than "a deep-seated anti-American sentiment."

¶6. (C) Duhaime reported "a strong ethnic tension" among participants. "The census is registering black Africans that are not Mauritanian citizens," one speaker said, adding that this would harm Mauritania's "racial balance." Earlier, a White Moor speaker was rebuked by Afro-Mauritanian participants after suggesting that the day's discussions be conducted solely in Hassaniyya Arabic, which is not spoken by many Afro-Mauritanians. Other discussions related to the racial violence of the late 80s and early 90s with Moors saying the country should "turn the page on the events" and Afro-Mauritanians insisting that "the events must be officially acknowledged and addressed."

¶7. (C) While the event was well attended by Mauritania's leading political parties, Taya's former ruling party the PRDR (formerly the PRDS) did not attend. Duhaime hypothesized that the party was afraid of being "attacked by the students who were strongly critical of the old powerbase." While PRDR retains the most developed party structure and has more money than the other parties combined, they continue to lose members and fade in relevance.

¶8. (C) Duhaime said the attendees were largely negative in reaction to the Constitutional Referendum scheduled for June 24, "focusing on what was missing and what needed to be added, rather than looking at the proposed positive changes."

OTHER NDI ACTIVITIES

¶9. (U) NDI will hold three additional Youth Days similar to the Nouakchott event. These events will take place March 18 in Nouadhibou, March 25 in Kaedi, and April 1 in Kiffa.

¶10. (U) On March 29 NDI will officially open its office and Political Party Resource Center, which will be available to political parties with computers, internet, a campaign library and printers for making flyers.

¶11. (U) Additionally, Douhaime will head a training mission to Mali, Senegal and Niger with nine political party leaders March 19-26 to meet political party counterparts and election officials to help political parties better understand their roles and responsibilities in the run-up to elections.

DUHAIME'S VIEWS ON THE CENSUS

¶12. (C) Duhaime said he believes the U.N. is "doing a poor job with the census," adding that "they defend the work they are doing with the government, but if you dig just below the surface, things don't look good." He said he didn't believe the census or voter lists would meet international standards, and asked "what will the UN do at that point? They've said they will leave, but can they? And what about the six million euros the E.U. has given? Will they still support the process without the UN's involvement?"

¶13. (C) Ambassador urged Duhaime to continue working collaboratively with the UN and to keep him apprised of NDI's activities and ways the USG could assist with their effort.

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Ambassador said he and other members of the U.S. Embassy would continue pushing their contacts on the commission and

throughout the transitional government for a successful census and voter lists.

LeBaron